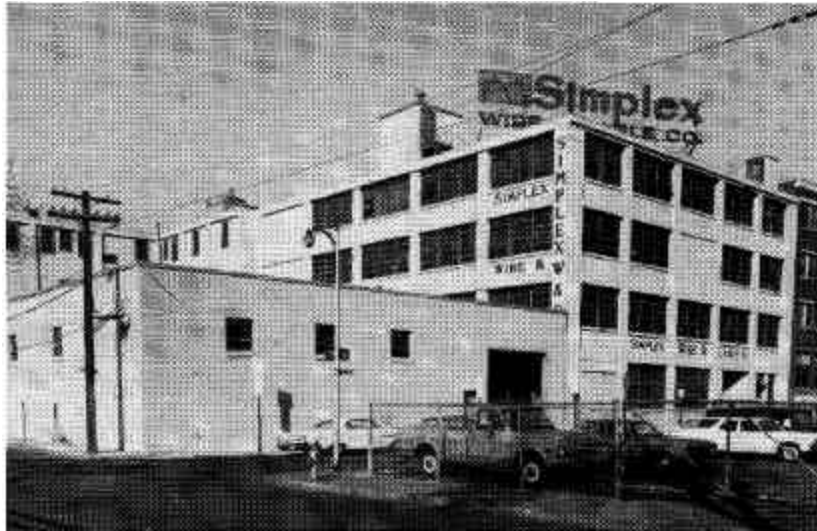


2 . Historical Background

Before outlining the planning assumptions and policies in the areas of land use, housing, transportation, economic development, open space, and urban design, a broader perspective is presented. Much of what the City encouraged in the 1980s as development and planning policy was an outgrowth of decisions made and efforts undertaken in the decade before. Those efforts in turn were initiated in response to the lessons learned in the decade before that. Some historical perspective helps to explain how the City evolved its set of planning assumptions and how the policies that grew out of those assumptions can be profitably altered to serve the city better in the decades that lie ahead.

The late 1950s and 1960s are important to consider because much of what transpired in subsequent decades, and what is occurring even today, is in response to actions taken and policies established in those decades. Each subsequent decade assumed a definable character that, when revisited, helps illuminate the circumstances that shape our decisions today. In each decade, the changes in the demographic character of the city's population, in the evolution of its economic base, in the changing character of land use, housing, and the institutions, and in the evolving modes of transportation can be traced and their impact on today's policy discussions understood.

This sketch of Old Cambridge (1745) shows the origins of the familiar street pattern of Harvard Square.



The 1950s and the 1960s- Trending Downward

Indicators of Decline

As we look forward from these decades, and particularly from 1960 onward, the future of the City of Cambridge did not look nearly as secure as it might from our vantage point in 1993. The city's population peaked in 1950 and each succeeding census would record a further decline. That decline reflected the national trend to suburbanization of the urban populations of the older central cities after World War II and the declining size of the family in later decades, compounded in Cambridge by the special influence of the large educational institutions and their distinctive populations. While young families and the financially upwardly mobile moved to the suburbs a parallel trend was clearly evident: the wholesale flight of the economic base of the city as the old industries that filled the brick factories of Kendall Square and Cambridgeport left Cambridge for distant suburbs, or for different regions of the country. The loss of Lever Brothers in Kendall Square was a hallmark; later Simplex Wire and Cable Company abandoned Cambridgeport. The former has been replaced by Technology Square, the paradigm for what would later prove to be the new Cambridge economy. The vacant Simplex Wire site is only now beginning to be occupied with what may prove to be the economic engine of the 1990s: biotechnology and other rarefied forms of research and manufacturing. Major employment sectors were being lost but it was not clear in these early decades what would replace them, either as job providers or taxpayers. Furthermore, those enterprises which remained in Cambridge found it difficult to thrive given tight capital and financing constraints. At the time the only growth industry was the education of other people's children at the two major institutions of higher learning, Harvard and MIT.

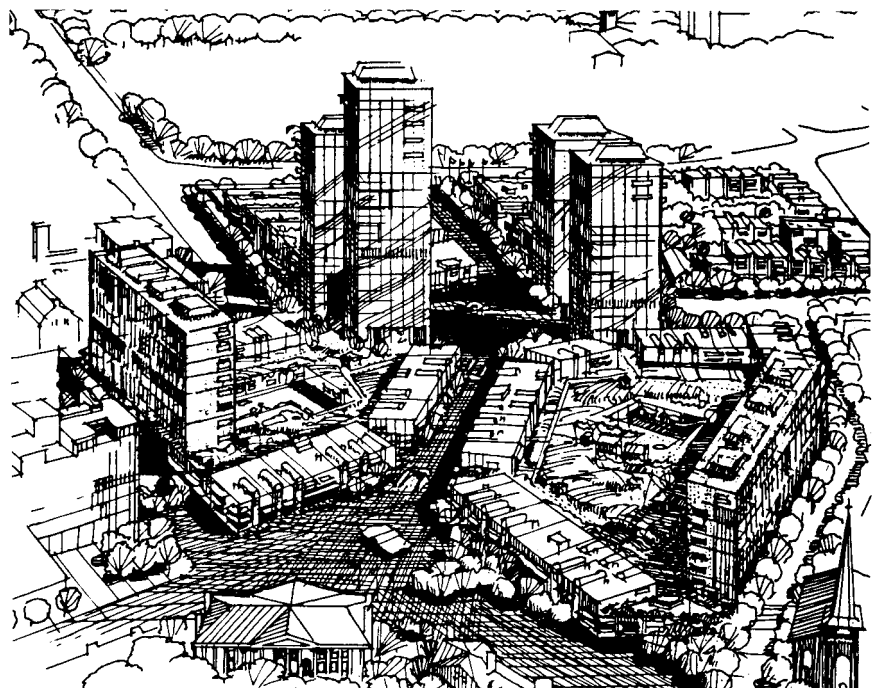
The flight of its young and prosperous population and the loss of the major elements of the old industrial economic base had serious implications financially for the City. From the perspective of the recent past it is easy to forget how precarious the financing of local government had become in the 1960s and 1970s and that two-thirds of the burden of financing City services was born by the residential segment of the city's tax base.

Redevelopment as a Solution

It is not surprising then that in those decades the city and its physical fabric were viewed as antiquated and in need of renewal. The dense residential neighborhoods which are so valued today were then viewed as cramped anachronisms. The intricate weave of narrow streets looked very claustrophobic in an age where the automobile was gaining ascendancy.

It is no surprise either that the decade of the 1960s saw the establishment of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority. The vision of the decade was expressed explicitly in several documents published by the Authority and its predecessor agencies, one lamenting the hopelessly outdated character of the city's triple-decker neighborhoods and the vital need to renew -that is demolish -them. Another envisioned the day when the center of Harvard Square would be flanked by office towers in the mold of the now emerging Kendall Square. Their early efforts, as illustrated by the residential building at 221 Mt. Auburn Street, promoted the vision of old neighborhoods replaced by a new contemporary development pattern of more efficient land use in large buildings specifically designed to accommodate the automobile.

In 1968, the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority envisioned a dramatically transformed Square, including four high-rise towers. Harvard Yard is in the foreground.



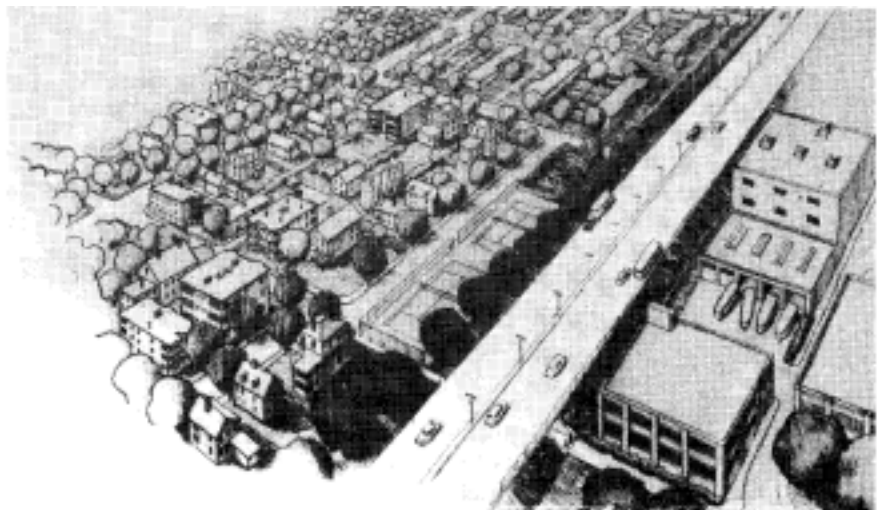
Zoning Amendments

Reflecting the new reality as well as the Zoning Ordinance adopted in 1960. It, and many subsequent changes to the document through the 1960s and much of the 1970s, reflected the prevailing notion that higher densities were desirable as an incentive to redevelop the older neighborhoods through private renewal and, in part, to accommodate the expansionist vigor evident at least in the city's two major institutions of higher learning. These were the decades when new programs were being developed at the national level to help inner cities overcome their new found obsolescence, through urban renewal, housing subsidies, and model cities. Substantial portions of Agassiz, Mid-Cambridge and Cambridgeport were rezoned to increase significantly the allowed density of development, to a level alien to these neighborhoods as they then existed. Harvard Street between Harvard and Central Squares is sprinkled with the brick products of that vision; large, blocky, apartment buildings replacing one or more wood frame homes and skirted by or perched upon an ample supply of parking. Some of the highest and densest housing in these years employed one or other of the several housing subsidy programs available to stem the flow of people out of inner cities.

Rise of the Automobile

One of the principal agents of the changing patterns of development in the 1960s, the automobile, was receiving its due. While we trouble ourselves today with the growing press of cars on all city streets, it is easy to forget that a six lane expressway (the inner belt) was proposed to march down Brookline Street in Cambridgeport, cross Massachusetts Avenue at Central Square and bore its way through the Area Four and Wellington-Harrington neighborhoods in a headlong rush to join the similarly configured Route Two extension. That extension was to course through North

This image from the 1955 Cambridge Capital Improvement Program illustrates a different attitude toward the automobile than we have today.



The Belt Expressway, if built on the route of Brookline Street, would act as a buffer between residential and industrial districts. See CP-6, next page.

Cambridge, along what is now the main commuter rail line out of Porter Square, and meet the inner belt in a grand interchange in Somerville. Simultaneously, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (now known as the MBTA) was slipping into decline.

The 1970s -Incipient Revival

The Highrise as Exemplar

The former Commonwealth Energy building at 669 Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square was the commercial development vision for Cambridge in the 1960s and early 1970s. At the extreme, Rindge Towers, or more benignly 295 Harvard Street, or the several elderly housing towers constructed throughout the city, reflected the housing vision for that same period. It is this vision that formed the redevelopment plan for Kendall Square which is slowly emerging into reality at Cambridge Center today. It is a vision that could be easily accommodated in many of the zoning districts established or continued in the 1960 zoning ordinance revision. From North Point on the easterly edge of the city to the tip of Cambridgeport at the Cottage Farm Bridge, an unbroken band of Industry B zoning permitted commercial development of almost any kind with few constraints, and no height limit. Central, Harvard, Porter, Inman and Trolley Squares were similarly unregulated at the same high density except that industrial uses generally were not permitted. Similarly permissive zoning could be identified in many residential neighborhoods of the city as well. Despite that permissive zoning and some new commercial development, as at Technology Square, the economic vulnerability of the city continued to deepen. No clear successor to the old industrial economy was on the horizon.



The Revival Strategy

The Kendall Square renewal area remained vacant. The industrial areas in East Cambridge, Alewife, and Cambridgeport continued to deteriorate as marginal uses began occupying the space left by the departing industries.

In that depressed economic environment, the City began to search for a strategy to revitalize its economy and secure a tax base to ease the burden on city homeowners and stem the decline of the city's financial health. The strategy chosen was to make comprehensive plans for selected declining industrial areas to attract those activities that could find an inner city location acceptable. It was also hoped that a comprehensive planning effort would make it possible to secure some of the growing array of subsidy and economic incentive programs developed by the federal government to help ailing local communities revitalize their economies.

Most people were unaware that there was a Lechmere Canal in the 1970s, when it was a derelict body of water surrounded by parking lots and former industrial uses.



East Cambridge and Alewife were initially chosen for those planning efforts, in part because the potential side effects of the proposed new development could be contained most easily with the least disruption to residential neighborhoods. In the latter years of the decade, the City produced two plan and policy documents for those respective areas, in 1978 for East Cambridge and in 1979 for Alewife. As a companion to those planning efforts, the City adopted the first significant downzoning of an anachronistic Industry B area, reducing the density of permitted development and instituting many detailed controls by which the City could shape the direction of any private development in the study areas. It is in part a reflection of the state of the city and regional economy even as late as 1978 that such a significant reduction in development potential was accepted by property owners with only modest protest.

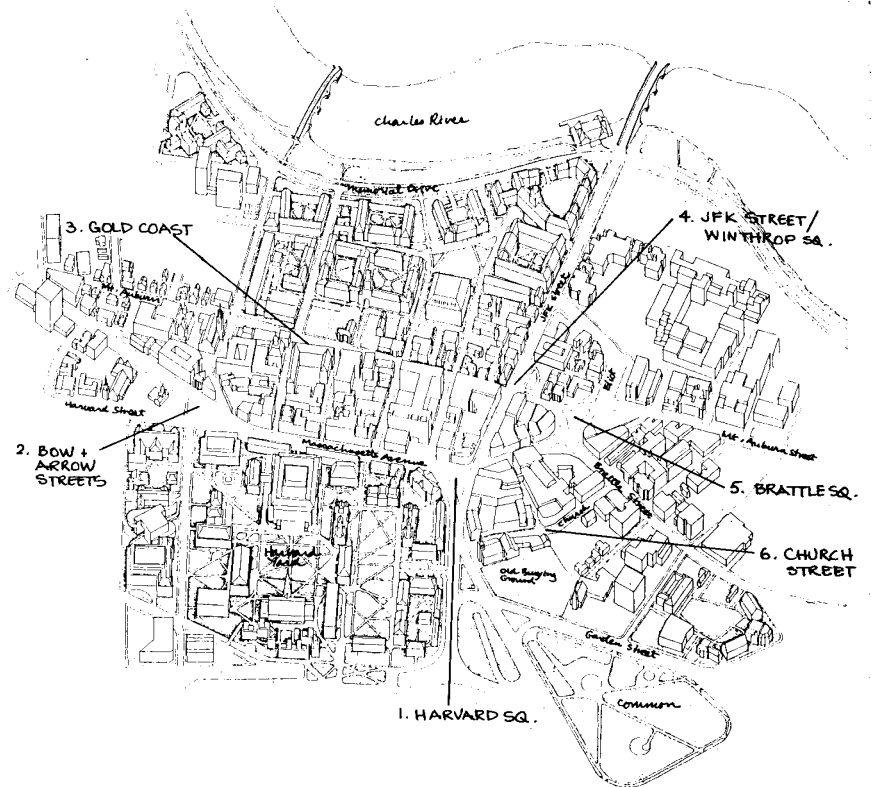
Residential Revival -Further Rezoning

Earlier and perhaps less dramatically, other changes were occurring in the city's residential neighborhoods. People were beginning to come back to Cambridge to live; these were not exactly the same families who left in the 1950s and 1960s, and these newcomers viewed the old neighborhoods and commercial centers with a more approving eye. The "1960s" versions of development were viewed with disdain and, beginning after mid-decade, a growing trend can be detected in the record of citizen sponsored, and at times City sponsored, rezoning petitions reversing, area by area, the increased density and development potential of the landmark zoning revision adopted a decade earlier in 1960.

The establishment of rent control in Cambridge in 1969 illustrates the complexity of the demographic trends shaping the future city. Adopted in response to low vacancy rates and spiraling rents throughout the 1960s, it is clear that the city and its housing stock was not being abandoned; rather the suburban working and middle class families were being replaced by others forming a different kind of household, of single persons and unrelated individuals, frequently associated with the education industry growing so dramatically in Cambridge and Boston. Two-thirds of the rental housing stock, about twenty thousand (20,000) units, were initially affected by the adoption of rent control.

In 1973 commercial Inman Square was rezoned; until that date it was permissible, if physically unlikely, to construct a 669 Massachusetts Avenue building in that neighborhood square. In 1973 and 1974 substantial portions of the Agassiz neighborhood were downzoned; Mid-Cambridge followed quickly in 1975 with reductions in density along Broadway and Harvard Street. In rapid succession other major downzonings were adopted: Porter Square in 1977, lower residential Cambridgeport in the same year, large areas of industrial and residential North Cambridge in 1978, most of the industrial portions of East Cambridge in the same year. In 1979 the Harvard Square Overlay District was adopted, establishing height limits there for the first time.

The Harvard Square Overlay District was refined in 1986 to recognize the special characteristics of six subdistricts and to encourage historic preservation.



New Transportation Directions

Early on, the decade began to bear the fruits of the growing opposition to major metropolitan highway construction, planned as far back as 1948 and advancing strongly in the 1960s. Protest throughout the region prompted a state moratorium on limited access highway construction within Route 128 in 1969; in 1972, after several years of study the inner belt and the Route Two extension into Cambridge from Alewife were officially deleted from the state's regional transportation plan. In a companion action, the State committed itself to major extensions of the MBTA transit system including one on the Red Line from Harvard Square to Arlington. The perennial problem of commercial traffic on the streets of Riverside and East Cambridge, and the boom in commercial development in Harvard Square, Alewife, and to a lesser extent Porter Square, keenly felt in the 1980s, have been influenced in part by the transportation decisions made in the early years of the decade before.

Trends into the 1980's -The New Prosperity

By the end of the 1970s a number of trends were clearly discernible. A gathering momentum would propel those trends headlong into the next decade, accompanied by an unprecedented level of regional prosperity. The 1980s would highlight the complexity of managing and balancing the consequences of an exceptionally high level of economic activity in the private commercial economy. The decade would also bring with it many extraordinary opportunities to enhance the public realm that only prosperity, and the leverage and income that flow from it, make possible.

Neighborhood Protection

One of the most significant trends was the expanding effort to protect all existing residential neighborhoods in the city such that their physical fabric would be stabilized and existing housing stock preserved; new development was intended to be permitted only at prevailing densities. The early downzonings in several neighborhoods have been noted. Similar rezonings in more areas and with greater refinement continued throughout the 1980s. The first townhouse ordinance, in 1976, and subsequent refinements in 1979 and 1989 were adopted precisely to encourage small-scaled, new development compatible with existing neighborhood development patterns. The special authority sought by Cambridge and granted by the legislature in 1979 to control institutional uses was motivated by the same objective: prevention of wholesale disruption, if not destruction, of residential neighborhoods by the expansion of institutional uses into them. The Institutional Use Regulations amendment to the Zoning Ordinance, adopted in 1981, implemented the authorization granted in 1979. Adoption of the Demolition Ordinance in 1979 and of the Mid-Cambridge and Half-Crown Conservation Districts in 1985 and 1984 respectively are elements of that same effort.

Commercial Densities Reduced

A second trend was the general reduction in the density of development allowed in the commercial and industrial areas of the city. As noted above, the reductions adopted in East Cambridge and Alewife were in furtherance of policy and urban design plans published by the City. Similar analyses would lead to reductions along northern Massachusetts Avenue and upper Cambridgeport and in Central Square in the 1980s. The process continued into the 1990s with an extensive study and rezoning in lower Cambridgeport, a second look at East Cambridge, and a look at the future of Alewife.



Residential construction activity was commonplace throughout the city in the 1980s.



The CambridgeSide Galleria at the heart of the Riverfront was reviewed extensively by the community over several years; the collaborative venture with the City is recognized as a national model for harmonizing good public and private design. In addition, the developer participated in the creation of Charles Park and helps maintain the public park system; the shuttle bus program helps alleviate traffic congestion; and significant jobs and taxes benefit the community.

Protecting the Public Interest

A third trend in the area of land use regulation was the continually expanding role of the public in reviewing and shaping private development in the city. With the establishment of a new planned unit development procedure in 1977 and the adoption of a parallel requirement for townhouse and multifamily housing about the same time, the City and its citizens have had an increasing opportunity to review and shape new development in Cambridge. That trend has accelerated and deepened throughout the decade with more and more development requiring special permit approval. Since issuing its first Planned Unit Development Special Permit in September of 1979, the Planning Board alone has considered a total of ninety-one applications for development approval, ranging in scale from the waiver of the sign limitation regulations on Alewife Brook Parkway to the request for approval of a 1,000,000 square foot retail, office, and housing mixed-use development in East Cambridge. Little more than a decade ago, each of those special permit projects could have been constructed without any public process and with little public or community opportunity to weigh the merits and demerits associated with the proposal, to secure necessary public benefits, and to reverse the course of a truly harmful scheme.